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Late life reflections on the downturn: perspectives from The Oldest Generation

Joanna Bornat & Bill Bytheway
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The Open
University

Faculty of Health and Social Care
The Open University
Walton Hall
Milton Keynes
MK7 6AA

www.open.ac.uk



Diary excerpt

'... On my shopping trip I got a fresh sack of birdseed, more salad and money from the PO to replenish my notes – doing a lot of spending these days. Better news of the banking crash today – may be we are going to see a new (expensive!) dawn & get rid of the gamblers in the City. ...'

(Diary entry, North Yorkshire, 13th October 2008)

Interview extract



... are you expecting them all to be in Jamaica next year, all your siblings?

Yeah, everybody, yeah.

What, even your own children, will they go?

Yeah, yeah.

It's going to be quite, going to be a major event, umm.

(Talks over) Yeah. Grandchildren, everybody maybe, yeah.

Yeah.

I hope it will, you know, with the, with the kind of, er, recession that's going on, you know, some people are thinking oh well, if I'd be able to go, but hopefully they're my family, they're, they're in a fairly well off position to go, just a matter of whether other things take priority.

(Extract from an interview, Milton Keynes, 9th July 2009)

The impact of the Downturn on older people



- Most at risk - those on fixed incomes and dependent on savings
- Generally - poverty rates are falling for pensioners, and most rapidly for oldest age groups
- Differences within and between age groups:
 - 2007-8 pensioner spending is rising more rapidly than for other age groups
 - Richer pensioners are spending almost the same as richer non-pensioner households
 - Amongst those aged 60+, lowest spending growth is in the oldest age group (80+)



What data from The Oldest Generation adds

- Evidence of heterogeneity in how older people are experiencing the current downturn
- Recollections of earlier downturns
- Awareness by older people of generational and age-related differences
- Evidence of the impact on day-to-day living



Methods

- Fieldwork with 12 families, each including at least one person aged 75 or more
 - The ‘Senior’ was interviewed first in July-Dec 2007 and secondly in Feb-May 2009, including the Timescapes downturn question
 - The ‘Recorder’ kept a diary and took occasional photographs of family events involving the senior



The 1930s Depression

... they were elderly, although nowadays they wouldn't be elderly parents, but my mother had previously, she'd lost her first husband when my brother was a baby. He was eight years older than I am. And then she remarried and then I was born obviously. She'd be about thirty-eight I think then. My father was in his forties. And my father came out of work when I was six, which everybody did in X really. And he didn't work again until 1939 and jobs became available.

And what work would he have done?

Labouring.

(Extract from an interview with a woman born in 1928 in X, a South Lancashire town, 2nd October 2007)



Remembering 1930s

- Geography of unemployment
- Differences across the labour market
- Hardship was the norm
- Downturn versus war years in recall



Generational difference

...you worry about the young ones, like Neal who's getting married in October. They're a young couple, he's only, is he twenty two and partner is just slightly older, she runs a, er...what is it? Well its hairdressing and beauty therapy and she's rooms that anybody can hire out. She started that a couple of years ago and as far as I know that's not affected her. Nicky's a plumber, they've got plenty of work in the meantime you know. So that's the kind of people you worry about, young people with a big mortgage.

(Extract from an interview, Scottish islands, 7th April 2009)



Generational differences

- Older generation - housing security, free/conc services helping younger family members
- Younger generation - concern for housing, their own futures
- Both generations – the rising cost of living

Evidence of the impact of the Downturn on day to day living



- *Budgeting* - 'no phone calls this week and I have not made any: keeping cost low' (*diary entry, 27.09.08*)
- *Paying bills* - '... went back to the bank to pay some bills, that's all I seem to do these days is pay bills' (*diary entry, 27.11.08*)
- *Looking for security* - 'I continued the search for suitable building societies where we can park money, which look reasonably stable' (*diary entry, 2.11.08*)
- *Concern of daughter* - 'Wilma (her mother, the senior) talks about the financial crisis and is anxious about her money that she has put into deposit savings from her house. Part of her would like to withdraw it all and put it under the mattress - no way, we tell her!!!' (*diary entry, 6.10.08*)



Conclusions

- Comparing the interview and diary data
 - *Interviews*: broader sweep, inter-generational comparisons
 - *Diaries*: day-to-day management of domestic and family routines, changes in circumstances and living arrangements
- Strength of intergenerational downward tie in ‘generational stake’ (Giarusso et al, 2004)
- Downturn in narratives - identity forming for some, episodic for others
- The oldest generation and a focus on the future - not necessarily their own